The Builder.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1852

UNTIL within a very short time ago the practice of working in iron had declined in England, and it is even now indeed but slowly reviving. The principle had been forgotten, that every material, to the extent that it differs in nature from others, should be wrought in a different form and proportion,—that to copy in iron the forms proper for stone is as contrary to good taste as it is to common sense. The introduction of cast iron, too, provided a cheap substitute for hand work; and as encouragement was thus withdrawn from the skilled workers, they gradually ceased to be. The want of right appreciation, even now, of the important principle to which we have referred, was shown, not many weeks ago, by the design determined on for the Clock Tower at the foot of London-bridge, which we found it our duty to condemn. We have sought from time to time to lead to a consideration of the principles on which metal should be worked, and have given numerous specimens of mediæval skill in the shape of grilles, gates, hinges, knockers, locks, and other fastenings, not simply that they might be reproduced, but that the principles on which they were formed should be understood and applied in modern designs to suit modern wants. In our pages, too, we may add, will be found representations of some of the most important modern works in iron, both cast and wrought.

We are not to be understood as objecting to the use of cast-iron, notwithstanding its tendency to lessen the opportunities for the application of skill to the working of iron; it is much too valuable a material for that, and conduces too greatly to the improvement of the dwellings and the increase of the comforts of the masses; but it should be kept in its proper place, and be used in a proper manner. Good forms may be cast as cheaply as bad ones, and manufacturers should not sacrifice propriety and fitness, as they constantly do, to obtain what they may consider a novelty.

This craving after novelty, undirected by right principles, leads often to the perpetration of strange outrages on good taste and good sense in other materials besides iron: and we will wander for a few minutes from our present purpose, to mention an instance of this, which may be seen on the south side of Fleet-street, No. 79, where a new front is being put up for a well-known frame-maker and dealer in looking-glasses. It is a singularly strange and senseless composition. All sorts of caps, capitals, and termini in compo appear one over the other, resting on a magnified top of a looking-glass, full to overflowing of flowers and cupids, which hangs destitute of all support over a yawning void below, the latter filled in with some very fine sheets of glass. Round the caps and termini, the crowning cornice of the house breaks five times, probably to afford foothold for figures or vases of some sort. The whole is a regretful waste of money and modelling, which can but make "the judicious grieve." On the opposite side of the way, at a "shop-front maker's," a similar, though less costly, error has been perpetrated. Caricatures of various styles are presented one over the other, with inharmonious effect. The mischief done to the rising generation by putting before them such incongruities as these is much greater than the well-meaning persons who perpetrate them imagine. These are public offences, and justify public reprobation.

To return, however, to the particular materials for design to which reference has been made. We have had many fine specimens of ancient metal-works in late years depicted by antiquarian draughtsmen, especially by Mr. Pugin, Mr. Shaw, and Mr. C. J. Richardson, and disseminated by the engraver. Numerous detached essays and articles on the various branches of the subject have appeared, too, from time to time, but it was left to Mr. M. Digby Wyatt to produce the first book on the subject which approaches to anything like completeness. A copy of this is now before us, entitled "Metal Work, and its Artistic Design," and claims from us the warmest commendation.* With fifty large plates in colours, it contains eighty-one folio pages of letter-press on the subject, under the heads Theory, Practice, and History. The first of these is subdivided into—1. Iron work, and the principles of its treatment. 2. Bronze work. 3. Gold work. 4. Silver work. The second treats of general principles, the formative processes (working, casting, chasing, &c. &c.), and the decorative processes (enamelling, niello, damascening, &c.); while the third section—History—gives separate chapters to Italy, England, France, Germany, and Spain. The letter-press is necessarily, to some extent, a compilation, the writings of Benvenuto Cellini (especially), Theophilus, Müller, Kugler, Pugin, W. H. Rogers, Holtzappfel, Ford, Labarte, F. Sere, P. Jacob, and others contributing, but it displays considerable research, much personal knowledge of the subject, and more than ordinary subsidiary accomplishments. The illustrations consist of gates, grilles, screens, handles, locks, hinges, taxse, monstrances, thuribles, lamps, pastoral staves, book-covers, reliquaries, chalices, jewellery, figures, knockers, and panelling. In addition to the contents of his own portfolio, the author has drawn upon those of Messrs. Burges, Penrose, E. Willson, Gibson, C. Barry, jun. E. Barry, Spurr, and others, and the drawings are all exceedingly well lithographed by Mr. F. Bedford. The frontispiece is a beautiful design for a precious book-cover, in which are combined many of those decorative processes which have been at various periods employed to heighten the effect of artistic metal-work. This is printed in colours, and, like the whole getting-up of the book, is creditable to Messrs. Day.

The Government Department of Practical Art will only be carrying out their purpose if they encourage the publication of works like this by purchasing a certain number for the provincial schools.† They may thus counteract the unjust tax levied on the producers of costly works by the law which requires the presentation of copies to various libraries, to some of which the public have not access even.

One of the laws to be deduced from the illustrations before us is, "that of the imperative necessity of adopting, as the basis of the design of objects executed in any material which nature offers to our use, a system of ornamentation strictly in harmony with the structure, chemical and mechanical, of the finished article—with the value of the materials of which it is composed—an association of ideas connected with them, and with its purpose and probable destination." The ornaments in metal-work ought not to be merely stuck on, but should arise out of the work. We have not yet brought ourselves wholly to condemn *imitative* design, as is the case with the able teachers who now regulate the Government schools, but we offer no approval to foliage and flowers in metal, which, as Mr. Redgrave says, "dangle and shake with every movement, as much almost as would their prototypes on their natural stem." We do not want iron to look like roses: we want it still to be iron ornamentally disposed. Objects of utility are to be beautified, not disguised. Having fixed upon the form most useful, we should decorate it instead of seeking to conceal its purpose. Mr. Wyatt justly opposes himself to the notion that good results can follow while the contriver of the object (the manufacturer) and the artist who makes the outward design are different people. "No successful results can be attained in the production of beautiful ironwork, or beautiful anything else, until one of three things takes place,—either, first, until the manufacturer and designer are one individual doubly gifted; or, secondly, until the manufacturer takes the pains to investigate and master so much of the elements of design as shall at least enable him to judiciously control the artist; or, thirdly, until the artist, by a careful study of the material and its manufacture, shall elaborate and employ a system of design in harmony with, and special to the peculiarities so evolved."

Our author refers slightly to one department of metal-work in which at this time not an attempt even is made to be decorative,—we mean plumbers' work, perfect in its execution so far as use goes, but "deservedly regarded as too ugly to be ever allowed to show its face; and it is invariably boxed up and hidden with an ingenuity that might have been better spent in redeeming its unnecessary deformity." Many ancient leaden coffins and fonts have been found curiously decorated: some of the old lead crestings are elegant heads of rain-water pipes display design; and in the Low Countries some of our readers will remember leaden canopies and terminals displaying considerable fancy and elegance. The lead font at Mayence, too, may be mentioned. Who will be the first to re-apply art in our plumbers' work?

Of the modern gold and silversmiths of France our author has a very high opinion, in which we participate: but we cannot go so far with him as to indorse his opinion that in Vechte we have an artist equal to Cellini. Of Professor Herdeloff, the Nuremberg designer, our author apparently has but a mean opinion. We are unable, however, to see the want of understanding which he thinks is shown in the design of a lock by that gentleman: the access to the key-hole is not blocked up any more than it is in the majority of ancient locks given.

It is quite certain that a change is taking place in our practical arts, and we trust our

* "Metal Work, and its Artistic Design." Dedicated by permission to the Right Hon. H. Labouchere. By M. Digby Wyatt, Architect. London: Printed in colours, and published by Day and Son, lithographers to the Queen, Gate-street, Lincoln's-inn-fields. 1852.

† The Museum of Practical Art, at Marlborough House, is now, again, open to the public, with many important additions.

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